

Politics And the Kennedy Factor

By Richard J. Whalen

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ONE OF THE MORE curious newspaper headlines of this very curious period in American political life last week informed Post readers: *With '76 Ruled Out, Kennedy Could Run in '80, '84, '88, or '92*. In 1992, the story reminded us, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who had just taken himself out of the race for the 1976 nomination, will be only 60 years old—a relatively youthful man by prevailing presidential standards.

The obvious question arises: In this highly uncertain and unpredictable world, why should we assume the presidential candidacy of a Kennedy as a constant factor? What, concretely, does Teddy Kennedy have to offer the American electorate today, much less a generation hence? Why should he ever be elected President?

Quite apart from the weight of his heavy personal and family misfortunes, quite apart from the persistent moral shadow of Chappaquiddick, Sen. Kennedy, it seems to me, labors under an ironic liability for so young a politician. He is the candidate of a waning national nostalgia, rooted in the legend of his martyred eldest brother, John F. Kennedy.

Even more ironically, his connection with that legend is tenuously personal rather than substantively political. Beneath the evocative name, face, voice, and "style" stands a politician whose views on public policy clash with the words, deeds, and commitments—indeed with the entire thrust and theme—of the only Kennedy presidency we are ever likely to have. If the senator

were not a Kennedy, he would be ranked among the leaders of the left-liberal assault on JFK's world view, foreign policy, and defense program.

Of course, times change, and so must men and nations. After Vietnam, we probably would not be stirred by a contemporary replay of John Kennedy's Inaugural Address. But many Americans still would respond, I believe, to the theme of the JFK candidacy and presidency—*America is a good country, bound by its sustaining ideals and circumstances to do better*. Even after the Nixon horrors, Americans have not given up on themselves and their country.

But this is not the theme of the left-liberals, for whom Watergate and the collapse of the Nixon presidency seem glorious, almost delicious vindication. They tell us, sometimes in so many words, that we live in a terribly flawed and afflicted country, a nation bound to suffer for its sins at home and abroad. Where JFK urged pride and sacrifice, EMK and like-minded Democrats preach guilt and remorse. Where JFK moved rightward in search of his popular majority, EMK & Co. move determinedly leftward, confident the country must eventually follow.

Several years ago as the dynasty's then-champion, Robert Kennedy, was launching his political and cultural insurgency against the usurper, Lyndon Johnson, Democratic elections analyst Richard Scammon made the acute observation that "the Kennedys are all-persuasive and ungermane."

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The challenge by Robert Kennedy to LBJ was a complaint without content beyond the merely personal. Scammon's remark has even greater point today as America slides toward a recession/depression — and perhaps Sen. Kennedy understood as much when he made his decision to withdraw from the 1976 contest.

Nothing in Sen. Kennedy's background, experience or public career visibly equips him to lead America out of its political, economic, and psychological blind alley. Whether or not he lacks character (a neglected traditional virtue newly rediscovered since the Nixon debacle), he is painfully deficient in the requisite competence. The Kennedy family office on Manhattan's Park Avenue has run his financial life, down to the smallest details, since he left college. His Senate career reveals no acquaintance with real-world economics, merely the predictable enthusiasm of a wealthy liberal politician for extremely expensive health and welfare measures.

Kennedy's doubtless sincere concern for "humanitarian" questions, such as the plight of refugees, does him credit, but the objects of his compassion are remote and abstract. On social questions closer to home, such as the impact of forced racial-balance busing in South Boston, he is an alien figure—indeed, a target for tomatoes—among the blue-collar, lower-middle-class ethnics and Catholics who display pictures of the revered JFK in their homes. Jack crossed the tracks, and Bobby at least straddled them; but Teddy, the rich, spoiled kid brother, doesn't travel well in George Wallace territory.

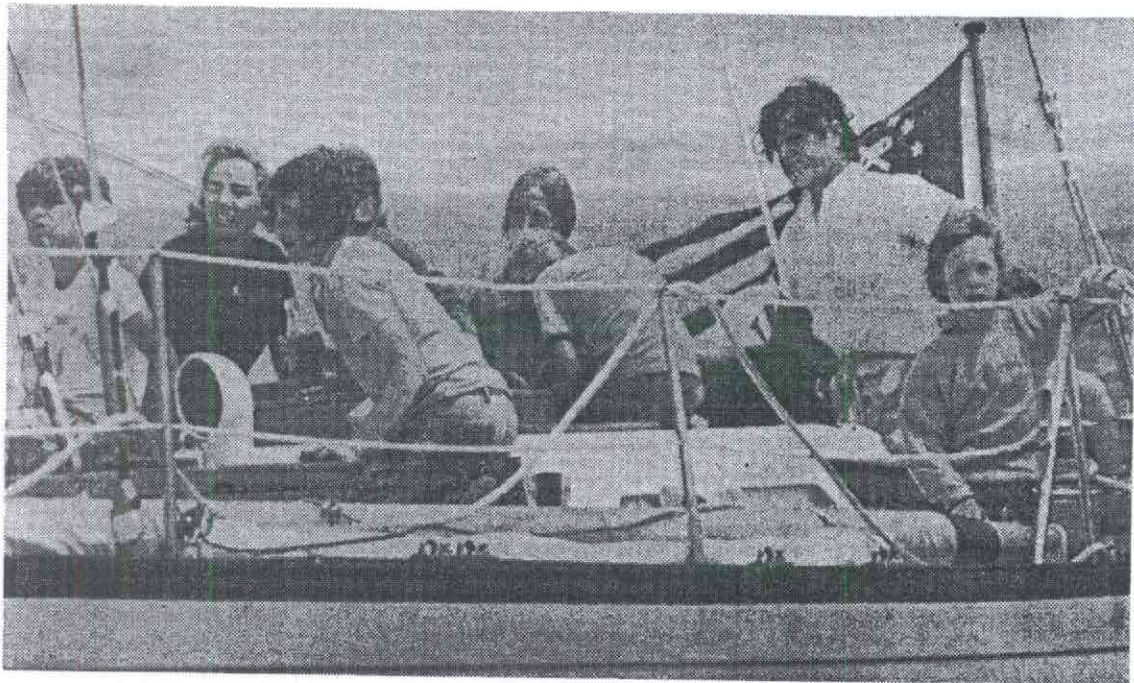
This is a decisive shortcoming for a

Democrat aspiring to national office. The Wallaceites, overwhelmingly Democrats-turned-Independents, have been in highly agitated motion since 1968; when most of them cease their wandering, as they may in the next presidential election, we will at last have a clear picture of the future of American national politics. The potential exists for the Democrats, increasingly split over the past two decades, to rebuild a viable coalition, once again including white Southerners and Northern blacks.

THE PRESIDENTIAL candidacy of Sen. George McGovern in 1972 gave the Wallace independents no choice but to stay at home or add to Nixon's negative landslide. A Kennedy candidacy, offering repackaged McGovern leftism under a charisma label, might have had a similar uplifting effect in 1976 on the presumptive Republican nominee, President Gerald R. Ford, who will need all the help he can get to escape the recession undertow. But Ford presumably won't have Kennedy to kick around.

Although Sen. Kennedy has been the odds-on-favorite to gain the Democratic nomination in the opinion polls, it is not as well known that he has also been the heavy Republican favorite because he seemed so eminently beatable. What better antidote to the Watergate poison, Republicans reasoned, than the murky Chappaquidick affair? Let Teddy run against himself while Ford, competent or not, glides back into the White House as Mr. Clean. The assumed Kennedy candidacy gave the Republicans their best hope of gaining another unearned, negative victory over a self-defeated Democrat.

Now this easy way is foreclosed by



United Press International

Sen. Kennedy and his sister-in-law Ethel take Kennedy children sailing on his sloop.

Kennedy's withdrawal, and the Republicans must pray for another fratricidal blood-bath among the Democratic left-liberals and centrists. This time, however, it may not happen—which will be bad for the Republicans but good for the country.

The removal of the Kennedy factor gives the Democrats an opportunity to sort themselves out on the familiar basis of interest-group politics, which is the primary and perhaps only reason for the existence of our broadly based parties. And our likely economic crisis will create the necessity for them to do so.

The Democrats will be free to give policy and program emphasis over personality, always, to be sure, with an eye on the nominee's likely ability to win. The smell of attainable victory through moderation should clear the minds of Democrats who have spent

eight years in the wilderness. If it does not, and if they insist on choosing a leftist ideologue out of step with the country, then they deserve the fate that awaits a party incapable of governing and content to play the role of a permanent opposition movement.

THE REPUBLICANS, who face extremely serious reverses in the November elections, are even more accosted than the diehard Kennedyites to taking Teddy as a fixed point of reference. They will be slow to realize the implications, especially after the off-year elections, of the deprivation, probably once and for all, of Chappaquiddick as an issue. The Republicans are confronted with the necessity to offer the voters a positive, specific program rather than the Nixon-era slogans.

The Democrats, for their part, are obliged to ask whether they are truly willing to govern in a political-econ-

omic crisis not of their making. If so, they will nominate a candidate whose character, competence and program might revitalize the center of our politics. Sen. Henry M. Jackson, JFK's ally and favored 1980 running-mate, might rebuild the Democratic coalition on a new political-economic-social axis, drawing the warring regions and factions together. If Jackson could be nominated, he would be President Ford's most difficult opponent.

Sen. Kennedy's withdrawal from the presidential competition is for him a personal boon. No man, even Joe Kennedy's son, is forced to pursue the presidency against his will and in the face of great danger and family tragedy. Teddy Kennedy is now free, not merely of 1976 but of 1992 and the presumption of a perennial Kennedy candidacy. And the Democrats and the Republicans are liberated from the Kennedy factor.